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ABSTRACT

Researchers have begun to analyze community college retention data in terms of students' stated objectives upon entry. By categorizing students based upon their most important reason for attending college, meaningful follow-up and assessment of students' goal attainment can be conducted. Program evaluation studies have produced evidence that student goal attainment is positively influenced by precollege orientation and the freshman success course. Precollege orientation is a valuable form of anticipatory socialization, that is, a process through which individuals come to anticipate correctly the values, norms, and behaviors they will encounter in a new social setting. Effective precollege orientation programs provide students with: (1) descriptions of college program offerings; (2) the college's expectations for students; (3) information about assistance and services for examining interests, values, and abilities; (4) encouragement to establish working relationships with faculty; (5) information about services that help with adjustment to college; and (6) financial aid information. The freshman success course typically includes topics which are highly correlated with academic persistence, such as managing time, memory techniques, writing test answers and course papers, and coping with overload and anxiety. Empirical studies undertaken at Bronx Community College (New York), Phillips Community College (Arkansas), and Miami-Dade Community College (Florida) provide evidence that the freshman success course effectively promotes retention. (JMC)

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# COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION: Some Procedural and Programmatic Suggestions

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**COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION: Some Procedural and Programmatic Suggestions**

**(This paper was presented at the Wyoming Higher Education Student Affairs Conference, 5/91)**

The purpose of this paper is to encourage community colleges to accurately assess student retention through goal attainment criteria and to make empirically based suggestions for implementing two programs that support community college student retention, Precollege Orientation and the Freshmen Success Course.

## Student Retention as Goal Attainment

More and more today, retention is being defined as goal attainment, which Astin (1982) described as the most effective way to measure student retention. Student goal attainment is simply defined as students satisfactorily meeting the educational goals they want to accomplish at that college. Collecting accurate goal attainment data is particularly challenging for community colleges due to the large enrollments of part-time and adult students, many of whom define their educational goals in non-traditional ways, such as personal interest and professional development rather than career training. Yet, the consequences of not

having this data include credibility issues, reduced ability to compete for higher education dollars, and poor institutional decision making.

According to Cohen and Brawer (1987), only specific categorizations obtained on college admissions forms can improve the quality and accuracy of retention data. They suggested adding the following question to current community college admissions forms:

> What is the **most important** reason that you are attending this college at this time? (circle only one answer)
>
> a. to prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university
> b. to gain training necessary to enter a new occupation
> c. to gain skills necessary to remain current or advance in a current occupation
> d. to satisfy a personal interest
>
> (page 174).

Those students who responded to a & b in the Cohen & Brawer question should be the ones most used in retention/attrition studies as they are most likely to have educational goals at the college that last longer than one semester.

With this categorization process and periodic follow-up, student goal attainment can be accurately assessed. Consequently, quality retention data can emerge, and effective evaluation of college programs in terms of how they contribute to student goal attainment can be implemented (Coll & VonSeggern, in press).

It is important to note that "determinants of retention/attrition are not shaped by the kinds of students enrolled in two-year colleges, but are influenced significantly by institutional conditions, such as programs, policies, organizational patterns, and interactive climate, after student matriculation" (Gates & Creamer, 1984, p.48). Program evaluation studies related to retention and attrition have produced evidence that student goal attainment is positively influenced by precollege orientation and the freshman success course.

## Precollege Orientation

Precollege orientation is the initial introduction to a particular college and its' environment. Most new community college students (especially those in Cohen and Brawer's categories a &b) must make adjustments to this environment and fit in to be successful. Precollege orientation has been proven to positively contribute to effectively adjusting, as it has been called a robust form of anticipatory socialization. Anticipatory socialization is defined as " a process or set

sort of precollege orientation should be mandatory for those new students who selected Cohen & Brawer's categories a & b, and encouraged for those students who selected categories c & d. After defining clear student goal aspirations per Cohen & Brawer, and implementing an orientation program which incorporates suggestions by Heath, et.al, a college should then evaluate the success of their programs related to the extent of it's positive influence upon student goal attainment (for suggestions about an effective framework for such evaluation, see Coll & VonSeggern, in press).

### The Freshman Success Course

Strong evidence for the retention supporting effectiveness of what is commonly called "the freshman success course" at community colleges can be found in the research literature. Typical freshmen success courses include topics such as managing time, note taking, memory techniques, skimming and scanning in reading, writing test answers and course papers, and learning how to cope with overload and anxiety. The learning of these topics is highly correlated to retention. (Heath, et. al., 1991). Heath et al. (1991) also discovered in their research that the freshmen success course contributes positively to academic performance as well a retention of community college students. Therefore, it is logical to suggest that the freshmen success course, as described, should be required for all new students who meet Cohen & Brawer's categories a & b.

The following empirical studies support this recommendation.

Research at **Bronx Community College** indicated that the mean GPA (2.71) of students who attended a freshmen success course was significantly higher than those who did not attend (2.11). Also, students who attended the course had a significantly higher re-enrollment rate for the following semester (5x) than those who did not (Donnangelo & Santa-Rita, 1982).

At **Phillips Community College, Arkansas,** the freshman success course was a significant contributor to both continued enrollment and higher academic performance during the first semester at the college. Indeed, the course was a significant contributor to persistence throughout the collegiate experience at Phillips CC (Jones, 1984).

Similarly, **Miami-Dade Community College** (Belcher, 1987) found that students who enrolled in the freshman success course were most likely to have continued enrollment one year later (67% compared to 46%). At the end of the first semester, 68% of the course enrollees had a GPA over 2.0 as compared to 56% of the non-enrollees (the text used at MDCC was Becoming a Master Student, by D. Ellis).

As with precollege orientation, colleges should evaluate the extent to which the freshmen success course influences student goal attainment (see Coll & VonSeggern, in press)

## Summary

Community colleges need to develop more accurate retention tracking strategies related to goal attainment. The Cohen & Brawer (1987) approach can provide accurate information to track student progress toward educational goals and goal attainment. This information can then provide support for retention encouraging programs like precollege orientation and the freshmen success course.

The research related to the effectiveness of precollege orientation and the freshman success course in helping retention or student goal attainment is persuasive. When a community college categorizes student intentions clearly, implements a precollege orientation program which positively impacts anticipatory socialization, and includes the six content areas mentioned previously, retention will most likely increase. Also, the utilization of a freshman success course that emphasizes strong content related to study habits, managing time, and coping with overload and anxiety, will add to retention and academic performance for many students.

Current community college enrollment stagnation (see Report on Educational Research, 1990) can also be hedged through utilizing these programs. Most importantly, precollege orientation and the freshman success course provide effective supports for community college students to achieve their goals.

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